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GALVESTON'S COMMISSION PLAN OF CITY GOVERNMENT

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The problem of municipal government is perhaps the most important single question before the American people to-day. It affects us in every phase of our daily life. Through the health, water, fire, police, sewer and other departments, every city government directly affects the health, life and property of every man, woman and child residing within its limits.

The City of Galveston, Texas, has played the scale of city government, and after more than ten years' experience has reached the definite conclusion that it has at least partially solved the problem with its commission plan, a simple and direct administration of the city's business by a mayor-president and four commissioners elected at large. The Galveston plan of city government has attracted wide attention throughout the United States. It has been in force since September 18, 1901, and is therefore no longer an experiment. The commission plan of city government is a very popular subject for debate in many of the universities and colleges of the country. Cities in many states are considering the advisability of substituting the commission plan for the old system of a mayor and board of aldermen. The Galveston plan, in brief, is simply a board of municipal directors composed of five members, a mayor-president and four commissioners, elected at large by the qualified voters of the entire city every two years.

It has been suggested that a proper term for the commission plan would be "Board of Municipal Directors" instead of board of city commissioners, as the term commissioners is somewhat confusing. The city commission is simply a board of directors, elected at large by the qualified voters of the entire city every two years. This board is composed of five practical business men, each fully recognizing the fact that economy and business methods, not politics, should be employed in transacting the business affairs of the city.

The business that is being directed by these five men, as agents for the citizens of Galveston, can be briefly summarized as follows: Furnishing the people with pure wholesome water, adequate sewerage, efficient police and fire protection, well lighted, clean and well paved streets, drainage, sanitation, public hospital for the sick and a careful management of the city finances.

This form of city government recognizes the fact that the city must be administered and looked after as a whole, and that it is not divided into units or wards. It holds the interest and the attention of the citizens and encourages good men to enter the city government. The strongest feature of the commission plan of city government is its perfect simplicity, its directness and in limiting the number of those directly charged with the management of the city's affairs and in the fixing or in the centralization of responsibility. In a strong address delivered at Harvard college, Hon. Elihu Root, one of the greatest lawyers this country has produced, made this striking statement: "I venture to suggest that there are two things to be done of vital importance, both of which require the highest degree of intelligence. One is that for the solution of the complicated questions that are now before us, government should be simplified in the highest degree. And to simplify is the function of learning. The other is that responsibility shall be fixed so that the people may know whom to hold responsible for failures to produce good government. The fixing of responsibility is a matter for the highest intelligence and courage."

Under the commission plan the mismanagement of a department is promptly laid at the door of the neglectful commissioner, not only by the general public, but by the mayor-president and the other members of the board. This knowledge of personal responsibility and watchfulness causes each commissioner to take a personal interest and to feel a special pride in the proper management of his department, realizing as he must that the merit as well as defects are easily recognized by his associates, as well as by the public generally. The mayor and commissioners are directors in the full meaning of the term. The detail work is done by the superintendents, heads of departments and clerks.

The business of the city is divided into four departments, each department being under the charge and direction of a commissioner. These four commissioners and the mayor, collectively, constitute

what is termed the "Board of Commissioners of the City of Galveston." The mayor is the president of the board and the executive head of the city government. He has all of the rights, powers and duties conferred upon the office of mayor by the constitution and laws of the state, has the right to vote upon all questions, but has no veto power. Majority rule always prevails.

The commissioners at the first meeting after their election or as soon thereafter as possible, by a majority vote, designate from among their members one "commissioner of finance and revenue," and under his direction is placed the offices of the city assessor and collector, the city treasurer and city auditor. He is also charged with the duty of examining into and keeping informed as to the finances of the city, and with the advice and assistance of the other members of the board he prepares the annual budget of the city. Great care is exercised in preparing the city budget and it is never exceeded in expenditures.

Another commissioner is designated "commissioner of water works and sewerage." He has under his special charge the construction, maintenance and operation of the water works and sewer systems departments. The superintendents of these two departments and the joint secretary and all employees are under the direction of this commissioner.

Another commissioner is designated "commissioner of streets and public property." He has under his special charge the supervision of all matters relating to the streets, alleys and property belonging to the city, and is charged with the duty of lighting the streets, looking after street cleaning and sanitation, the supervision of street paving, construction of drains, and seeing that the conditions of the grant of public franchises are complied with.

The city engineer and his assistants, city health physician, superintendent of drays, health inspectors, city sexton, sidewalk inspector and all employees in these departments are under the direction of this commissioner. Bids must be advertised for in every instance where the expenditure exceeds \$500 and no bonds can be issued without a favorable vote of the taxpayers.

The other, and fourth commissioner, is designated "police and fire commissioner." He has under his special charge the enforcement of all police regulations and the general supervision over the police and fire departments. The chief of police, police officers,

chief of fire department and firemen and the judge and clerk of the corporation court are under the direction of this commissioner.

The city secretary and city attorney are officers with which the mayor-president is closely associated and are usually nominated by him. All officers and employees are nominated by the commissioners in charge of the respective departments and are elected by a majority vote of the entire board.

The mayor or any commissioner can be removed from office for official misconduct, drunkenness or incompetency upon a proved charge made before a district judge.

The city charter requires that the board shall meet in regular session at least once every week. These meetings take place every Thursday afternoon at six o'clock. These meetings are conducted in a dignified, business-like manner, and are free from wrangling, disputes and confusion. The commissioners sit around a directors' table, the mayor presiding. The city attorney and the heads of the various departments are required by the city charter to attend all meetings of the board. But little speech-making is indulged in, and the presence of idle spectators is an exception rather than the rule. Business is transacted promptly, but without any undue haste. All important matters are discussed and differences adjusted in conference. The city attorney has great influence with the commissioners, and his advice is freely sought. "Too many cooks spoil the broth," is an old saying, which can well be applied to a board of twelve or sixteen aldermen. In Galveston it has been clearly proved that four commissioners and a mayor, or a president, can transact the business of sixteen aldermen and a mayor, and do it better, more expeditiously and with greater harmony.

What the present board has accomplished for the city, under the most adverse circumstances, has indeed been wonderful. They first secured and paid for the services of a board of three eminent engineers, composed of General Henry M. Robert, U. S. A., retired; Alfred Noble, and H. C. Ripley. This board prepared the plans for raising the grade of the city and the building of the great sea wall. The commissioners also removed all of the old political employees and engaged the services of capable men in their places. The city hall and water works pumping station were rebuilt with current funds, and the fire stations repaired. All floating indebtedness inherited from the old city government was paid and the city

placed on a cash basis. The interest on the bonded indebtedness, for five years, with the consent of the bondholders, was reduced from five to two and a half per cent, and this benefit was given to the taxpayers. The improvements made by the city government under the commission plan from the date of its inauguration, September 18, 1901, up to January 1, 1911, can be best understood by glancing at the following figures, furnished by the city auditor:

Raising the grade of the city	\$2,000,000.00
Additional gulf front protective improvements	179,388.65
Additional grade raising West End	176,327.76
Water works improvements	312,242.11
Brick paving in streets	237,902.36
Drainage	319,651.63
Sewer extensions	290,231.04
Rock and shelled streets	279,647.77
Addition to electric light plant	37,459.76
Total improvements	\$3,832,851.08

Of these improvements \$2,759,170.88 were paid for in bonds and \$1,073,680.20 were paid for out of the general revenue of the city. The city has also paid out of its general revenue \$200,000 floating indebtedness. Exclusive of the bonds issued for grade raising and school purposes, the board of city commissioners have issued the following bonds:

For paving, drainage and shelling	\$300,000.00
Additional gulf front protection	225,000.00
Filling north of Broadway and west of Thirty-third	78,270.88
Balance sewer bonds on hand when commission took over the city government	227,400.00
Total	\$830,670.88
Less bonds now on hand and unsold	71,500.00
Total net	\$759,170.88

The duplicate water main bonds for \$100,000 have not yet been issued. The total amount of bonds paid off and destroyed by the board of city commissioners, including \$550,000 of the grade-raising bonds retired with state donation funds, is \$1,124,336.62. There were also destroyed \$620,663.38 in bonds left in various funds from the mayor-aldermen administration.

It might also be of interest to mention that the city has collected from vehicle licenses \$67,102, which has been devoted exclusively to street improvements; also collected interest on bank balances, \$79,290.01, and interest on back taxes, \$59,161.29. The city has also paid off a number of old judgments, inherited from former administrations, aggregating \$18,026.65, and has purchased new fire engines and other equipment. The city collects interest on bank balances from bonded depositories; collects a special vehicle tax, which goes to the street improvement fund; enforces sewer connections; has metered the city's water service; has cleared the sidewalks of fruit stands and other obstructions, which have occupied them for years; has prosecuted to a finish all outstanding lawsuits; collects taxes promptly; has destroyed the policy evil and public gambling and adopted an ordinance districting barrooms out of the residence section. The city has financed the raising of the grade of the city. The elevating and raising of the 2,156 buildings was paid for by the owners. The county of Galveston has financed the building of the sea wall, the construction of the beautiful gulf front brick driveway and cement sidewalk three and a half miles long. The county, jointly with the railroads entering this city, are financing the splendid causeway now being completed, connecting the island with the mainland. The sea wall and causeway each cost \$1,500,000. The sea wall and grade raising have rendered Galveston absolutely safe from serious damage from the most violent storm that could possibly occur.

In securing the services of heads of departments and employees the commissioners have completely ignored political influence. Capacity and fitness alone have been considered. Each commissioner has taken a deep personal interest and a pride in the success of his department.

The present commission is made up as follows: Lewis Fisher, mayor-president; I. H. Kempner, commissioner of finance and revenue; H. C. Lange, commissioner of water works and sewerage; V. E. Austin, commissioner of streets and public property; A. P. Norman, police and fire commissioner. With the exception of the present mayor-president, all of the commissioners have served from the very first, having been returned to office at each of six elections. They all own their homes. Galveston's first mayor, under the commission plan, was Judge Wm. T. Austin, an enterprising, intelli-

gent and thoroughly patriotic citizen. After serving for a little more than four years, he died on November 6, 1905. Mr. H. A. Landes, a retired merchant, and one of the city's oldest and most honored citizens, succeeded Judge Austin and held the office until May, 1909, when he was succeeded by Judge Fisher. Judge Fisher's first public office was that of county attorney, next county judge, and later district judge. He resigned the last mentioned office after his election as mayor-president. Mr. Kempner is a financier of splendid ability. He is the head of a large cotton commission firm, is president of a prominent bank, president of a wholesale shoe and hat company, and is president of the Galveston Cotton Exchange. Mr. Lange is the head of a large wholesale grocery firm. Mr. Austin is in the real estate business, and Mr. Norman an insurance agent and stock broker. The mayor-president receives a salary of \$2,000 per annum and each of the commissioners \$1,200 per annum. All of these officials were re-elected for two additional years on May 9, 1911.

The salaries paid to the heads of city departments are as follows:

Assessor and collector	\$1,800.00
Chief of fire department	1,800.00
Assistant chief of fire department	1,200.00
Secretary water works and sewer departments	1,500.00
Health physician	1,500.00
City secretary	1,500.00
City auditor	1,500.00
Chief of police	1,500.00
City engineer	1,500.00
Assistant city engineer	1,080.00
Judge of city court	1,200.00
City treasurer	1,200.00
Harbor master	1,000.00
City attorney	1,200.00
City sexton	1,000.00

The city also has a large number of employees on its pay rolls, receiving \$1,000 per annum and less. The city attorney and city engineer are the only employees of the city receiving fees. No extravagant salaries are paid by the city; there is not an overpaid man on the pay rolls, and all seem well satisfied. The city's system of bookkeeping and accounting is in keeping with the commission

plan itself. No city in America has a better system. The city hall is a business office and not a loafing place for politicians. The press of the city publish in detail all that transpires at the weekly meetings of the city board, which is very helpful from an educational standpoint.

The city owns its own water works, costing more than a million and a half dollars, also owns its own sewer plant, as well as electric light plant. All three give general satisfaction. The city also maintains a very efficient and well equipped fire department.

There can be no question about the wisdom and the propriety of cities in adopting the commission plan framing their charters to suit local conditions. There are some so-called improvements, however, which the writer believes decidedly injurious, the most serious of which is the proviso requiring that the mayor and commissioners must give their entire time to the business of the city. This sounds well and at first is catchy, but serious reflection will show it to be very unwise. A successful business man, the kind we should place in charge of the business of our city, will at once lose his identity and standing in the business world, when he accepts office upon such terms, and this fact will prevent men of breadth and personal success from being secured; in fact, their services will be actually prohibited by such a provision being placed in the city charter. To apply such a provision to the Galveston charter would absolutely deprive this city of the services of every member of the present board.

The recall feature, especially where the percentage is low, and there is a cosmopolitan population, is a two-edged sword and subject to improper use, and is more of an injury to the commission plan than a benefit. This was proved in the City of Fort Worth, where an attempt was made, through petition, to force the police commissioner to stand for re-election by an element that he had offended through the performance of his sworn duty. The state statute contains ample provision for the removal of incompetent or corrupt public officials. The recall is not necessary and only tends to complicate. Business men will not hold public office where they are liable to be called upon to go through one or more extra campaigns during a single term. It is very difficult at best to induce competent business men to run for office. O. B. Colquitt, governor of Texas, vetoed the Texarkana City charter on February 21, 1911,

because it contained the initiative, referendum, and recall features. His message to the legislature condemning these features was a strong and able document. He declared that ours is a representative republic, not a simple democracy. Under the provisions of the recall a condition could be created which would be worse than the despotism of a single ruler. Good municipal government is a question of very great importance, and one which deserves the best attention of ripe statesmanship, but it will not avail much to adopt every new fad suggested as a balm for municipal sores and mismanagement.

Galveston is an independent school district. The school board is composed of seven trustees, the very best men in our city, who are elected by a direct vote of the people at special elections, three one year and four the next. The office pays no salary. The city government makes the tax levy and collects the taxes, turning the money over to the school treasurer, but it has no other connection with the schools. The separation of the schools from the city government was a wise measure, with the result that politics with all of its disturbing influences has been kept out of their management and administration. Besides being economical and progressive, our school system is looked upon as a model throughout the state.

Mr. Macfarland, president of the appointive board of commissioners for the City of Washington, says that "the great danger to the elective commission form of government is that while at first it would be non-partisan, after a while the inevitable effects of partisan politics may appear and it will lose its high character. The ideal system is one under which the citizens treat all municipal matters as public business and not political business, and that is not possible for any great length of time where they are divided into political parties by their opinions which have nothing to do with municipal business, and only confuse public opinion." On this subject former President Roosevelt says: "The lines upon which national parties divide have no necessary connection with the business of the city. Such connections open the way to countless schemes of public plunder and civic corruption." The truth of both these statements is well recognized in Galveston, and if the high standard of our city government is to be maintained this peril must be avoided in the future as it has been in the past.

The commission plan of city government is not a panacea for all

municipal ills, neither is it an insurance against bad government. It is an improvement, it is a magnificent success, but it does not relieve the people from the responsibilities of self-government. The problem of municipal government after all is the problem of good citizenship. If the citizens take no interest in their municipal government and have no feeling of patriotism or pride in its success, the commission plan, or for that matter any other plan, will prove a failure. It must be remembered that, with a commission or any other plan of government, the question of men and citizenship is highly important. No plan ever devised will successfully run itself. Patient labor, personal sacrifice and self-denial is the price of good government. If the people and the public press demand a high class of public servants and will pay the price, they will get them, but if civic pride among the people runs low and but little interest is taken in municipal affairs, a poor assortment of officeholders is bound to result.